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RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE USD FAS WASHINGTON DC
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0069
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2235

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000014

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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DEPT PLS PASS CDC AND HHS-STEIGER, BELL, HICKEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [SENV](#) [CASC](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA CONFIRMED IN TWO WEST BENGAL DISTRICTS

REF: KOLKATA 011

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Indian Ministry of Agriculture announced the presence of the H5N1 virus at two poultry farms in West Bengal. Reportedly, 20-30,000 birds have died since January 7. Beginning January 16, approximately 100,000 birds will be culled within a five kilometer radius from Birbhum, where the samples were taken. Authorities have imposed a ban on poultry trade in Birbhum, South Dinajpur and adjoining districts, and also on poultry trade across the border with Bangladesh. Poultry owners will be compensated at a rate of 40 rupees (USD 1.00) per bird. Post will issue a Department approved warden notice about the presence of Avian Influenza (AI) in West Bengal. State officials appear to have been slow to respond to the AI outbreak in not effectively educating locals about the health risks, isolating the affected areas and providing adequate safety equipment to the initial responders. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) West Bengal state and Indian federal government confirmed the presence AI virus in the samples sent for testing (reftel). The GOWB Animal Resources Department (ARD) confirmed that samples taken from Margram in the Birbhum's district and also from a state-run farm in South Dinajpur district's Balurghat village were positive for the H5N1 virus. West Bengal joins Gujarat/Maharashtra and Manipur as the third Indian state to report an outbreak of avian influenza. Authorities will now begin culling in the area. At least 100,000 birds will be destroyed, and owners will be compensated at a rate of 40 rupees per bird.

¶3. (U) Media reports, quoting Birbhum district ARD sources, said 20,000-30,000 chickens have died so far. Bird deaths have also spread to two more districts -- Balurghat in South Dinajpur and Khargram in Murshidabad district - both located about 400 miles north of Kolkata. While the Murshidabad district is adjacent to Birbhum, South Dinajpur is further up North. Both districts share a border with Bangladesh.

¶4. (U) The GOWB Animal Resource Department director told post that they have moved hardware and nearly 350 personnel to Margram. The GOWB has deployed 50 Rapid Response Teams at Margram as well. Currently, the state has a stockpile of 50,000 doses of Tamiflu. In addition the state has mask, gloves and aprons for 10,000 people. However, media reported that initial responders to the AI affected areas were handling carcasses without proper gloves, masks or other protective equipment. Press also reported that locals have eaten dead birds and showed pictures of children playing with chicken carcasses. In addition, press reported the WB state ARD and the state Health Ministry officials were not coordinating their work. Although,

contacts in those two offices told post they were working together. Isolation wards have been set up at Kolkata's Infectious Disease hospital, Margram's local health center, and nearby Rampurhat Subdivisional Hospital.

¶5. (U) The GOWB has imposed a ban on poultry trade in Birbhum, Murshidabad and South Dinajpur districts. Movement of poultry in and out of this area has also been stopped, as has trans-border movement of poultry between India and Bangladesh.

¶6. (U) On January 15, Embassy New Delhi and Post conducted an AI Working Group digital video meeting to share information and review Mission response to the outbreak. Post will issue a Department approved warden notice and will send staff to the affected area to assess the efforts at containing the AI.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Initial comments from Post contacts and media reports indicate that local authorities have been relatively disorganized in responding to this AI outbreak. So far efforts to create a cordon around affected areas, educate local populace about AI risks and to deploy needed safety equipment all seem to have been inadequate.

JARDINE